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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MEXICO 005620

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SUBJECT: MIGRATION, POVERTY AND OTHER DYNAMICS IN CHIAPAS

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Classified By: Chalres Barclay. Reason: 1.4 (b),(d).

1. (C) Summary: Poloff and Econoff explored current political, social, and economic dynamics in Chiapas during recent visits to the state, among Mexico's most culturally and geographically distinct. Although the Zaptista movement of the mid-1990s raised the profile of Chiapas and resulted in increased federal and international aid -- leading to rapid development in Tuxtla Gutierrez and Tapachula and some towns along the tourist trail -- poverty and marginalization remain endemic to the region's scattered indigenous communities. The PRD governor is focused on attracting investment and has established a good working relationship with the Calderon administration, but his achievements to date are few. Although the Zapatistas have quieted as a guerilla movement, the social tensions that spawned their rise remain. These include: historic resentment as a result of government oppression, corruption, and neglect; poverty resulting from (among other factors) a lack of jobs and poor infrastructure, health services, and education; persistent land and religious disputes; and the negative consequences of outward migration of Chiapanecos and transmigration of Central Americans. There appears to be no overall development plan for the state or coordinated strategy to combat these social ills. This cable explores four specific themes: migration, poverty, education, and the status of the Zapatista movement. End summary.

Significant Migration

2. (SBU) Chiapas is a state of heavy migration, including out-migration of state residents and transmigration of Central Americans headed to the United States. The consequences are significant: there is now a labor shortage, and the border area is plagued by corruption, human rights abuses, trafficking in persons, the spread of infectious diseases, and trafficking in arms.

3. (SBU) Almost 10% of Chiapanecos (350,000-400,000) now live in the U.S., with migration there having rapidly increased over the past decade, according to state government officials. The principal destinations for them are California, Florida, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia. Migration is explained by the weak economy, lack of sufficient investment in infrastructure, health, and education, and the growing networks of Chiapanecos in the U.S. Many indigenous communities, widely dispersed across difficult terrain, have less than 100 people each, and it's proved too difficult for the government to provide these scattered villages with public services needed to grow economically.

¶4. (SBU) Brain drain is a particular problem for the state, where the educated typically leave in search of relevant work nonexistent at home. Many of those left behind are living on the federal government's anti-poverty program known as "Opportunities" (covering 50,000 families in Chiapas) and off of remittances. According to the state government, Chiapas received USD 807 million in remittances in 2006, equivalent to 22.8% of the state budget. The majority of those who do work in Chiapas are engaged in the informal sector.

¶5. (C) The head of the state government international affairs office acknowledged to Poloff that the southern border is virtually unprotected. The Mexican/Guatemalan border from the Lagoons of Montebello to Tapachula can be easily crossed by migrants, and there is little control by Mexican immigration or customs authorities to stem the flow of migrants or goods across this border.

¶6. (C) Mexican authorities estimate that over one million Central American migrants cross Mexico's southern border each year, half of whom are aiming for the U.S. In descending order, they come from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Cuba. Many of these migrants live temporarily in Chiapas before continuing northward, and Tuxtla Gutierrez, the state capital, has doubled in size over the past decade with a large "floating" population. INM officials are responsible for controlling the 659 kilometer-long Chiapas border, and a state government official responsible for migration affairs told Poloff that up to 50% of U.S.-bound migrants are detained, while the other half get through. (Note: The percentage of reported detainees, apparently stopped for administrative reasons, is likely exaggerated. End note.)

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¶7. (C) Central American migrants are extremely vulnerable as they cross into Mexico, becoming targets for exploitation by corrupt Mexican authorities and criminal groups. Poloff heard from numerous contacts that tainted officials routinely solicit bribes to allow the passage of Central American migrants en route to the U.S. Migrant women are particularly vulnerable, and incidents of rape common. Trafficking in persons and prostitution of Central American women, girls, and boys, is a significant problem along the border area. Migrants making their way north who refuse to pay bribes to groups like the Mara Salvatrucha often become victims of violence, with some losing their limbs.

¶8. (C) Poloff was told that HIV-AIDS, tuberculosis, cholera, sexually transmitted diseases, gastrointestinal problems, dengue fever, and other infectious diseases are on the rise in Chiapas as a result of Central American migration. Prostitution, trafficking in persons, and rape, including sexual violence against women in indigenous villages, contribute to the rapid spread of these diseases. There is little public knowledge about them, and Poloff is not aware of any significant public awareness campaigns to educate the population about risks and prevention of infectious diseases. Medical care for those migrants is extremely limited, just as it is for the majority of the indigenous Chiapas population.

¶9. (U) While migration has in many ways been a negative phenomenon for Chiapas, it has also contributed to the region's economic growth and cultural diversity. Each year, Chiapas brings in up to 45,000 Guatemalans to participate in a guest worker program which the state government would like to expand.

Endemic Poverty

¶10. (U) Despite being rich in natural resources, severe

poverty remains widespread in Chiapas. According to a recent report from the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL), Chiapas has the highest incidence of poverty in the country, with food-based and assets poverty rates (2005 figures) of 47% and 75.7%, respectively. This is compared to national averages of 18.1% and 48.2%. (Note: The food-based poverty line is an estimate of the income required to purchase a food basket satisfying minimum nutritional requirements. The assets poverty line includes spending on education, health services, housing, clothing, and transport. End note.)

¶11. (SBU) An official from the Secretariat of Social Development described the northern and southern parts of the country as "two different Mexicos." He attributed the lack of development in Chiapas to poor education, health care, and infrastructure. Many parts of Chiapas are not easily accessible by roads, negatively affecting tourism, and many communities have no road access. While the state is a large producer of electricity, many homes do not have electricity. Of the nearly 4.5 million people that live in Chiapas, more than a quarter are indigenous and about half live in rural areas, primarily working in agriculture. Tourism, coffee, and remittances are the other forms of income; there is little industry.

¶12. (U) In addition to "Opportunities," federal and state-level development agencies have implemented a number of programs aimed at alleviating poverty, including microfinance initiatives, a program that provides aid for adults over the age of 70 living in small rural communities, and a program that compensates people who open affordable childcare centers in their homes. The latter program is intended to assist mothers who are forced to work because their husbands have migrated. A pilot program establishes centers that are accessible to the scattered municipalities and provides internet access as well as equipment and material for kids to do homework assignments. Although this program makes sense on paper, in practice it faces the problem that it takes an average of two hours for a student to go from his/her home to the center.

Poor Education

¶13. (SBU) Educational levels, which are low in Mexico as a whole, are particularly deficient in Chiapas (reftel). Many students, particularly indigenous girls, do not finish

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primary school, and indigenous communities often lack secondary schools. The state's illiteracy rate is 20%, well above the national average of 8.4%. A professor from the National Autonomous University of Chiapas told Econoff that a combination of factors are behind these poor results, including difficult access to schools, malnutrition, and lack of Spanish in many indigenous villages. She added that children from smaller, rural towns sometimes do not attend school because they have to work, and that class schedules in these areas have failed to adapt to the necessities of students. About 70% of the state's primary schools are located in the more populated cities.

¶14. (SBU) Econoff was told that indigenous students are on average more perseverant than non-indigenous students because they have to work twice as hard to be able to attend school. The professor remarked that Mexico's south does not receive enough resources from the federal government for education, adding that in her opinion, preference is given to the industrialized northern and central regions. She added that educators need more funding for materials, technology, and training opportunities for teachers. (Note: Poloff witnessed the positive impact of the USAID-sponsored TIES program in a village near San Cristobal de las Casas, where an indigenous teacher TIES scholarship recipient was impressively using his

knowledge of experiential learning techniques and computer skills learned in the U.S. to instruct his fifth grade students and train other teachers. End note.)

A Faded Zapatista Movement

¶15. (C) The Zapatistas are dormant as a guerrilla entity, but still present as a limited socio-political movement in the indigenous border and jungle regions of Chiapas. State government officials insisted that the conflict of the mid 1990s was essentially a public relations ploy by the EZLN leadership to attract international attention, and that it today represents no threat to state stability. NGO and indigenous community members agreed that the EZLN presents little risk of violence, although they also believed that social tensions caused by poverty, inequality, and the continuing sense of indigenous marginalization remain.

¶16. (C) There are at least eight autonomous Zapatista communities in the state, organized around the so-called theme of 'Buen Gobierno'--principles that apparently laid behind the 1996 San Andres accords which the Zapatistas say the federal government reneged on. There is no clear relationship between the government and these communities, although they appear to coexist peacefully, and neither government nor NGO contacts knew how many people live in them.

¶17. (C) As a result of the conflict, Chiapas now gets more federal money than any other state, as well as significant international aid. However, political observers agree that EZLN leader Subcomandante Marcos seemed to have lost an important political opportunity to raise the profile of his movement during the 2006 presidential elections, allowing his so-called "Other Campaign" -- a national plan to change Mexico from the bottom up through the support of leftist, grass-roots organizations and trade unions - to wane.

¶18. (C) Sporadic incidents of violence in the state are usually related to land disputes within and between communities, rather than political reasons. A researcher focused on the Zapatista movement from an NGO called SiPaz told Poloff that although the EZLN has publicly rejected the use of force and wants to be recognized as the voice of the disenfranchised, it is unlikely that all of its members have given up arms.

COMMENT

¶19. (C) There are demonstrable signs of improvement in Chiapas, particularly regarding infrastructure development in the capital and principal towns. Some indigenous communities, especially those close to the tourist trail, have improved roads, schools, and health services. Yet other communities seem as distant from the global economy as ever, and the government does not appear to have a coherent development plan for reaching them or building human capacity. Poloff was told by most contacts that the state governor seems weak, lacking in strategic vision, and stuck in the same 'old style' Mexican politics that have long held

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this region back. Although the Zapatista movement has largely faded and soldiers help guarantee state stability, social tensions caused by poverty, marginalization, and migration are as real as ever. If Felipe Calderon wants to show he is a president for all of Mexico, then a lot more will need to be done here.

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